

A STUDENT'S REMEMBRANCE OF DICK FROESCHNER

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When I first received an invitation asking me to write an appreciation of Dick Froeschner, I was more than a little overwhelmed. What could a country doctor who has spent 20 years practicing in rural Alaska have to contribute to a learned journal of entomology? My entomology has disintegrated to an ongoing war with mosquitos and treating “bug” bites, the subtleties of Hemiptera, Heteroptera, and Homoptera long since forgotten. But I have not forgotten Dick Froeschner.

As we go through life we are indeed privileged if we have one truly great teacher, a teacher who reaches inside and turns something on, or changes our lives, opens up new worlds or makes us see the old one differently. Such teachers are rare. I’ve been lucky. I’ve had many good teachers, lots of excellent ones, a few great ones, and one truly great teacher. That man was Dr. Richard Froeschner. I think often of Dick and the many things he taught me, and of his great good humor.

The first time I met Dr. Richard Froeschner was in the mid 1950’s at Montana State College (it has since dubbed itself a University and raised tuition). I was an Aggie, a wiseacre major in animal husbandry, who took a course in zoology out of boredom. It was one of those glorious days as only a brilliant fall day in Montana can be. I was in my usual classroom spot, which was the back row looking out the window wishing I were anywhere but in college, and wondering whatever I was doing in a course that looked like it might take some work and thinking seriously of dropping it. Dick Froeschner entered the room—bounced is more the word—with a disarray of yellowed papers under his arm and wearing a sport shirt and open-toed sandals (a social outrage in Montana in the 1950’s). The disarray of papers spread across the podium. Dick Froeschner looked at the class, grinned, and commenced what was for me one of the most significant hours of my life. For the first time I heard someone who really made sense. He talked about life, about science, and about what he hoped to teach us that year. I was never really sure whether he talked or just enthused. But the next day I moved down to the front row and stayed there. During that year Dick Froeschner covered zoology from bottom to top in one of the hardest, most fun, most challenging courses I’ve ever taken. He taught much more than zoology—he taught about life. Throughout the course a recurring theme was a great tree of life which, unlike the dead trees so commonly found in biology books, Dick made into a living thing that changed and grew, full of mystery and surprises. Dick taught us also about science, scientific inquiry, experimentation, and truth. His lectures were animated and fun, full of examples that caught the imagination. His blackboard danced with small creatures to illustrate some point or another.

I wasn’t the only one who was spellbound. After every lecture a goodly part of the class would spill into Dick’s office next door where the students encountered skeletons, rattlesnakes in cages, piles of books, and an even bigger disarray of papers. Dick would patiently answer questions, stimulate arguments, and challenge us to think

and reason. No question was too silly or sophomoric to deserve a considered answer, which often would illustrate a fundamental point in biology. Dick Froeschner had a loyal and consistent following of students and was one of the most popular and most respected teachers on campus.

The next year I followed zoology with Dr. Froeschner's course in entomology, where he rose to new heights because that's where his love was. That year I learned from Dick so much more than the usual mandatory review of the insect world and its cousins. Again he taught of the wonder of life, how things changed, and how they are related to each other, and the excitement of looking for and identifying new things. That year Dick also taught us about work and challenges. He had acquired several books and papers written in Russian, a language unfamiliar to him. Midway through the year he bought several Russian dictionaries, opened the largest tome of entomology I'd ever seen and with dictionary started at the first page. He learned enough Russian to grasp the meaning of articles dealing with Hemiptera, and had fun doing it. He tried to teach some of us Russian (probably one of his few failures). But what he did teach us was that no task was too impossible or difficult if it really needed doing.

I was fortunate to become Dick's lab assistant in general zoology. Working with him was a chance to see his disciplined and ordered approach to teaching and to appreciate his good humor. One of the events of the year was known among students as Froeschner's Bug Feast, in which Dick supplied delicacies from the insect world which were consumed with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

No one ever explained quite how it happened, but during those years the zoology lab became the gathering place for an ongoing debate on just about anything debatable. Somehow physics majors, chemistry and biology graduate students, and various lab assistants would drift into the zoology lab. It was nothing formal or organized, it was one of those things that happen. The arguments never really began or ended, but just continued. Occasionally they would drift over to the student union building, but almost always they stayed in the lab room. Dick Froeschner would be putting around with lab specimens, not quite involved in the discussion, which generally had to do with such things as infinity, dimensions, the definitions of life, and other subjects that were terribly important and urgent. The arguments, always animated, were occasionally heated. Dick would be silent through most of them. At the oddest moments he would ask a question or make a comment over his shoulder, which in a few words would center the entire discussion. He would in a word illustrate some fundamental point of science or some obvious truth we were all missing. It was with a few words at just the right time that Dick Froeschner taught us what scientific inquiry really means. He taught us about rational thought and relevance and truth. He taught us that scientific truth was hypothesis and theorem and proof and fact, and that theorems change, but truths and integrity do not. He challenged us to reason through a problem, to see the subtleties of an issue, and to look through the complexities to the simple answers.

Many times over the years I have thought of those days sitting on the edge of a lab table waiting to make a point or covering the blackboard with chalk to demonstrate one. And Dick with a quiet smile keeping things going, not infrequently by changing sides in the argument midway through and leaving us all sputtering. Dick never lost

patience and would sit through the most silly arguments, sometimes until late in the evening, always guiding and teaching.

There was another place that Dick Froeschner could be found besides the classroom and the teaching laboratory. High up under the rafters, the top floor of Lewis Hall housed the entomology collection—quiet and dusty, trays and trays of mounted insects carefully classified and arranged, a large working table with microscope, and the usual disarray of papers, somehow more neatly arranged. Scattered among them were many of Elsie's wonderful drawings, papers in progress, notes and letters from colleagues, and dozens of specimens waiting to be classified, along with books in a dozen languages. That was not the domain of Dick Froeschner, teacher and friend, but that of Dr. Richard Froeschner, entomologist and researcher. It was here that Dick so often said he recharged his batteries, for as much as he loved teaching, his life was research. Dick said many times that research was the fuel that kept him going.

No man could continue to carry the load of full-time teaching and full-time research that Dick did. He put too much energy into both, and he had to make a choice. He did, and he made the only choice that Dick Froeschner would ever make—he chose research. My senior year of college Dick Froeschner left Montana State for Washington, D.C. and a career in research. Lewis Hall and the Biology Department seemed empty and quiet when Dick left. The discussions in the zoology lab dwindled and disappeared, and some of the zest and energy in the department left with him. There were other good men there, wonderful teachers and good friends. But somehow when Dick Froeschner left the sparkle that all of us felt, students and teachers both, was gone.

Shortly before he left, Dick invited me to his house for dinner with him and Elsie. No mention of Dick Froeschner would be complete without a word about Elsie, her great good cheer, tremendous interest in life, and wondrous drawings and illustrations. I remember that evening as we talked long into the night. By that time I had transferred from the agricultural college to biology and was seriously considering entering medical school. Dick talked at great length (dare I use the word harangue) about the joys of research and pure science as opposed to what he considered the witchcraft of medical science.

I'm afraid I was a great disappointment to Dick. I fell from the path of truth and righteousness and entered medical school. But it was Dick Froeschner's teachings that carried me through. Since I entered practice, I cannot count the number of times when faced with a difficult or seemingly unsolvable problem I've thought back to Dick Froeschner and the way he approached the unknown and was able to solve or work through a difficult situation. It's been far too many years since I've seen Dick Froeschner, something I hope to rectify in the near future. But I shall always be grateful for what he did. He taught me to think.